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ABSTRACT

This study examined new teacher perceptions of the impact of mentoring as evidenced through their experiences in the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program. Primary questions were whether participants experience mentoring as an aid in successful completion of their certification and whether the mentoring component increased teachers' sense of their capacity to teach effectively. Data were gathered through 5 focus group interviews, in which 35 new teachers participated. Themes from the focus groups were organized into conditions associated with mentoring, relationships between mentors and mentees, and processes associated with mentoring. Issues related to each of these areas were identified. Many participants were not aware of how mentors are assigned, and thought that the assignment process should receive more attention. Time and location were considered necessary for a mentoring relationship. All participants thought a good relationship was vital to a successful mentoring experience. When mentoring was working, respondents thought it aided them in improving their teaching practice, as the mentor did things like modeling effective practice, conducting sample lessons, and acting as a critical friend. (SLD)

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE MENTORING COMPONENT OF THE LOUISIANA TEACHER ASSISTANCE AND ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE MENTORING COMPONENT OF THE LOUISIANA TEACHER ASSISTANCE AND ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Since the beginning of the current reform movement, policy makers have been concerned about projections of teacher shortages (Baker & Smith, 1997). Prediction models point to the likelihood that rising enrollments, implementation of policies calling for smaller class sizes, and increased retirements will lead to profound problems associated with a lack of qualified teachers (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997). Projections show that the number of elementary and secondary school teachers needed will increase by 1.1 percent annually to a total of 3.4 million by 2008 (Gerald & Hussar, 1998), and the number of newly-hired public school teachers needed by that time will be between 1.7 million to 2.7 million (Hussar, 1999). Teacher shortages are expected to be especially prevalent in mathematics, the sciences, and special education (Southworth, 2000), and in urban schools (Derlin & Schneider, 1994; Gonzales, 1995; Harris & Associates, 1995.

Given the emergent demand for new teachers, it is especially troubling that the annual attrition rate for teachers with three or fewer years of experience is approximately eight percent (Grissmer & Kirby, 1997). New teachers face a multitude of challenges, especially in the face of an increased focus on accountability, the concurrent pressure to raise test scores, and the introduction of demanding standards-based curricula. New teachers often feel alone and that their college or university training has not prepared them for the reality of the classroom (Kramer, 2001); feelings of isolation and frustration are among the most-cited reasons new teachers leave the profession (Easley, 2000). The absence of professional support or connectedness is a particular problem for new teachers. As Mauer and Zimmerman (2000, p. 26) put it, "'Isolated ... Emotionally disconnected... No one to turn to.' That is the way

many beginning teachers describe their experiences. No wonder so many leave teaching within the first few years." Yet, historically there has been relatively little attention to the needs of new teachers (Moir & Gless, 2001).

The large number of new teachers entering the profession in the next few years will require significant types of support (Portner, 1998). Teacher induction programs featuring some mentoring component have become an extremely popular policy response to this need; about two-thirds of the states have mandated some form of mentor support for beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). The United States Department of Education (1998) reports that the number of public school teachers participating in new teacher induction or evaluation programs which often include mentoring has more than tripled during the last thirty years.

As a case in point, the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LTAAP) is a three-semester program that provides participating new teachers with a planned program of support while also providing a statewide measure of teacher competency for certification. The inclusion of a mentoring component in the LTAAP program was specifically designed to provide assistance to new teachers through classroom visits and conferences in a formative rather than summative measure of evaluation.

The purpose of this study was to determine new teacher perceptions of the impact of mentoring as evidenced through their experiences in the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment program. The primary research question addressed whether participants experience the mentoring component as an aid in successful completion of their certification. Additionally, the study addressed whether the mentoring component increased teachers' sense of their capacity to teach effectively.

Review of Literature

A variety of helping relationships between two individuals or groups may be termed "mentoring," and there are numerous interpretations of the mentoring process. Most often, the term mentor is associated with providing guidance (Bey & Holmes 1992), serving as a role model (Crow & Matthews, 1998), or being a counselor, coach, or sponsor (Jacobi, 1991). Traditional definitions view mentoring as a one-way relationship in which the mentee is in a subservient role, being molded by someone of greater age, wisdom, or position who appears capable and complete (Allerman, Cochran, Doverspike, & Newman, 1984; Bowen, 1986). Underlying these definitions are questions of power: one participant is positioned as an expert who provides counsel and guidance to the novice.

In contrast, mentoring may be viewed as a complex or multi-faceted phenomenon (Jipson & Paley, 2000). Mentoring may assume any number of different forms, and in different contexts, mentoring relationships may create new experiences for the mentor and the mentee. Mentors may offer counsel, provide information, interpret cultural codes and practices, serve as role models, and act as advisors, guides or advocates in a variety of formal or informal contexts. Bennis (1993) suggests the interactions employed in mentoring relationships include collaboration, shared decision making and systems thinking. He contends that the relationship is the most important part of the mentoring process. Collaboration and mentoring are often closely intertwined, but while power issues may be at play in a collaborative interaction among equals, novices are less likely to challenge the experience of the mentor while they are learning.

In many professions, novices are inducted into their respective professions through formal internships or apprenticeships (Portner, 1998). In education, mentoring can be viewed

as a professional practice that occurs whenever an experienced teacher supports, challenges, and guides novice teachers in their teaching practice (Silva, 2000). In the past mentoring was typically initiated either as an informal response to a beginning teacher asking for help or as assistance offered by an experienced teacher willing to share his or her expertise. Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) have suggested that the emergence of mentoring in education as a formal part of teacher induction may be seen as part of a broader trend involving the professionalization of teaching and the emergence of teaching as more collegial, collaborative, and team-based.

Policy makers have pinned high hopes on mentoring as a vehicle for reforming teaching and teacher education. Although mentoring is only one part of a successful induction program, it is among the most utilized. There are three key propositions that provide a rationale for the use of mentoring in education: new employees or inductees need support and continuing staff development to succeed; mentoring is an important piece of a successful induction strategy; and mentoring provides benefits for all participants (Newcombe, 1988). A compelling reason for implementing a mentoring program is that even the best pre-service programs do not fully prepare professionals such as teachers for the reality of their work. The expectations and demands of school, the variety of decisions to be made, and problems that arise in their early teaching career confront new teachers. The combination of a veteran teacher and a new teacher can promote the growth of a personalized relationship between both, providing help for the new teacher and a renewed sense of worth for the veteran (Clement 2000).

The goal of most mentoring programs is to offer intervention that orients new and returning teachers to the school and community and provide instructional support that

enhances professional development and retention of teachers (Blair-Larsen, 1998). Mentoring has been shown to be an effective mechanism for one-on-one professional guidance and for cultivating a teaching culture in which expert teachers serve as an essential resource for new teachers (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 1999). Mentoring has also been associated with change and innovation in teaching (Hudson, 2000).

Enthusiasm for mentoring has not been matched by the emergence of a strong research base or clarity about the purposes of mentoring, however. Before about 1990, the literature on mentoring consisted mainly of program descriptions, survey-based evaluations, definitions of mentoring, and general discussions of mentors' roles and responsibilities. Researchers did not conceptualize mentors' work in relation to novices' learning or study the practice of mentoring directly. There were few comprehensive studies that were well informed by theory and designed to examine the context, content, and consequences of mentoring (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). Feiman-Nemser further notes that there have been few studies focused directly on the impact of mentoring on the quality of teaching and the retention of teachers. However, there is some evidence to demonstrate that mentoring improves success of beginning teachers.

Research studies conducted by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1999) show that beginning teachers who receive mentoring become more effective as teachers, and leave teaching at much lower rates. These studies show that today's fledgling teachers are choosing not to follow the pattern of their parents and grandparents who have historically remained at a single job or one company until their retirement. To combat this challenge, school systems must find creative and strategic ways to support new teachers as a deterrent to attrition. The NCTAF studies emphasize the importance of the kind of social

support provided by mentoring, and the role it has played as an essential element in keeping new teachers in the profession. This line of research emphasizes that school districts that move aggressively toward reforms that include new teacher support will find their efforts to be both beneficial in terms of promoting teaching quality and cost effective (Easley, 2000).

Jambor and Jones (1997) show that mentoring encourages new teachers to reflect on the following areas: instructional practices, performance assessments, classroom management, and effective communication. They further state that mentor teachers assist novice teachers in learning the value of instruction by using questioning to encourage dialogue and focus attention on objectives and outcomes. Similarly, Chase, Germundsen, and Brownstein (2001) assert that mentoring can have a positive impact on teacher efficacy. They note that a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (1999) shows a clear link between teacher efficacy and student achievement, and that the sustained teacher reflection that takes place in the context of mentoring relationships can be a route to increased teacher efficacy.

The benefits of mentoring extend to veteran teachers, and not just to their mentees (Ganser, 1999). Veteran teachers frequently characterize working closely with beginning teachers as a source of fresh ideas about curriculum and instruction that are immediately useful to them. Mentor teachers emphasize that working with a beginning teacher requires continual self-analysis of their own work, as they are asked to make explicit what has become automatic over the years in terms of procedural matters, curricular matters, instructional matters and classroom management matters. Thus, veteran teachers often view mentoring as a major component to teacher efficacy for themselves as well as for their mentees.

Not all of the research on mentoring is positive. In particular, as with most reforms, there is ample evidence that while mentoring has a sound theoretical relation to desired

outcomes, implementation may be a problem. First, Newcombe (1988) contends that the multiple use of the term mentoring can lead to confusion for novice teachers, especially when comparisons are made between mentoring relationships in education and those found in other fields such as business. Novice teachers do not relate their new experiences to those of people in the business world. Confusion about the mentoring process, the role of the mentor, power relations between mentors and mentees, and the purposes of mentoring processes all contribute to implementation difficulties.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) report that although mentoring programs have become widespread as a part of teacher induction programs, their implementation has often been disappointing. Mentoring practice may fall short of its ideals not only because of poor policies or program design but also because educators fail to regard mentoring as integral to an approach to teaching and professionalism. Good mentoring is not accomplished easily. Educators must challenge and extend the role of the mentor in a world where the very nature of teaching is undergoing profound changes. From their perspective, the mentoring of new teachers will never reach its potential unless it is guided by a deeper conceptualization that treats it as central to the task of transforming the teaching profession itself.

For mentoring to contribute to school change, an important challenge in the mentor/mentee relationship is how to embed the practice of mentoring in the inquiry cycle. Teacher educators must work with mentors and mentees to help them develop the self-confidence needed to engage in critical inquiry (Silva, 2000). An inquiry-oriented culture is one where mentors and mentees can begin raising the questions of what makes a reform minded teacher and what makes reform minded teacher education.

Silva (2000) stresses the importance of clarity in the roles played by mentor and mentee. A mentor's work is socially conceptualized, based on the interaction of teachers around professional issues and carried out over time. Mentors who work side-by-side with prospective teachers or new inductees need to think about the relationship in new ways. She explains that it is vital for mentors, who act as quasi-supervisors, to emphasize their efforts in nurturing reflective teachers who play key roles in their own professional learning. Similarly, Koki (1999) highlights the importance of providing staff developing to mentors to help them develop an understanding of effective mentoring and allow them to shape and give meaning to their role. It is also important to the success of mentoring for the partners in the relationship to have the space and authority to conduct their work.

Methodology

As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to determine new teacher perceptions of the impact of mentoring as evidenced through their experiences in the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment program. The primary research question addressed whether participants experience the mentoring component as an aid in successful completion of their certification. In studying the effects of the mentoring component of LTAAP, two primary questions were addressed:

1. How was the mentoring component of LTAAP implemented?

2. How did the mentoring relationship influence the practice of beginning teachers?

The primary method of data collection was focus group interviews, which provide an opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on the topic of interest in a limited period of time (Morgan, 1997).

Participants

Focus group participants were teachers in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. Jefferson was selected as the research site for convenience, because it afforded the researchers access to a large number of new teachers, and because it has rural, urban, and suburban schools and a diverse socio-economic and ethnic population. The parish has 84 schools and within any given year has many new teachers in each school. This provided a research population of over two hundred beginning teachers within the parish. After obtaining permission from the school system to conduct the study, teachers were chosen for the focus groups from a list of the participants provided by the parish who were in the LTAAP program.

A total of thirty-five teachers participated in five focus groups. Demographic characteristics of participants are displayed in Table 1. As stated earlier, all teachers were LTAAP participants employed by the Jefferson Parish Public School System, and all had been mentored for at least one semester, in some cases two. All of the participants were in the process of attaining certification from the state of Louisiana through the LTAAP program. The participant group was typical of the population sampled. Most of the participants were female, with only six males participating. Twenty-five percent of the participants were African American and seventy-five percent were white. This is a typical sample of the new teachers in Jefferson Parish. All but two participants were new to the profession; one participant had twenty years of experience in the teaching profession in a parochial school, and another had five years of experience in another state. According to state policy, these individuals had to be included in the LTAAP program for purposes of receiving certification in Louisiana.

Table 1. Focus Group Profile

Focus Group Number	Number of Participants in group	Range of Experience in Teaching	Race	Gender
Focus Group #1	6	1-2	2 Black 4 White	2 Males 4 Females
Focus Group #2	5	1-2	5 White	1 Male 4 Females
Focus Group #3	8	1-20	3 Black 5 White	2 Males 6 Females
Focus Group #4	8	1-2	2 Black 6 White	1 Male 7 Females
Focus Group #5	8	1-5	4 Black 4 White	8 Females

Research Procedures

The LTAAP program has two broad stages: the two assistance semesters and one assessment semester. New teachers are defined as those who hold type C certificates (a certificate held by those teachers with less than three years teaching experience), those who hold temporary authorization to teach, teachers moving for the first time from Louisiana nonpublic schools to public schools, and new teachers from out of state who are unable to provide appropriate evaluation results from their immediate preceding employer. During the first semester, a mentor teacher is assigned to assist the new teacher in becoming a competent, confident teacher within the framework provided by the Louisiana components of effective teaching. The evaluation team is made up of the mentor and the school principal (or designee). During the third semester, the assessment team is made up of the mentor, the school's principal (or designee), and an external assessor, usually a retired educator.

Classroom observations are used to gather data. Data collected by the assessment team are the basis for recommendations to the Louisiana Department of Education and the State

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding the teacher's certification. During the third semester of employment, the administrator and the external assessor evaluate the certification candidate. From the evaluations the assessment team determines if the criteria for certification have been met based on the Revised Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching. Four domains are considered in the evaluation: planning, instruction, management, and professional development.

The focus groups were conducted after the assistance semester. The focus groups were obtained by using a mailed letter of introduction and a consent form to all prospective participants. Potential respondents were contacted initially through a letter of introduction. In the letter, the importance of the study and the reason for the research were presented. Prospective respondents were also assured that answers would be coded, overall group findings reported, and individual responses to any questions would remain confidential. After a two-week period, a follow-up letter of consent was sent to each of the prospective participants. In an effort to increase the number of respondents and decrease the amount of time to communicate with each member of each focus group, the researchers also incorporated the use of an e-mail system throughout the Jefferson Parish School System. The focus groups were held in a neutral location to ensure participants comfort over a two hour period.

A brief, open-ended set of interview questions were used that asked the teachers their experiences while they were involved in the LTAAP process. The questions used were based on the experience of the new teacher and how the mentor's involvement in the program affected the beginning teacher's perception of the process. The specific questions discussed in the focus group were:

1. Did you have a mentor during the first year of teaching? If no, were you assigned one? If yes, how was the relationship established?
2. Did the mentoring relationship influence your practice? If yes, how?

Prompts were used to ascertain details and keep members of the focus group on track with the research questions. The researchers acted as facilitators for the focus group. The researchers asked questions or used prompts to clarify what had been said. Repeating participants' answers for clarification was used throughout the two-hour session.

Data Analysis

Data were collected from the focus groups in the form of audio-taped records of the focus group discussions. Tapes were transcribed individually to create a written record of the data. Analysis comprised the process of reading, re-reading, and arranging written records, including the written records of focus group interviews, field notes kept by the researcher, and other journals that the researcher compiled to increase his understanding of the data. The analysis revealed several emergent themes, i.e., topics that came up repeatedly across individuals and groups relating to teacher's perceptions of the LTAAP mentoring process. A matrix was developed to study the common threads of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Conclusions from the focus groups were compared and contrasted to link the data into one cohesive structure.

Trustworthiness & Researcher Bias

Since qualitative research is interpretive in nature, it is critical that the reader understand the biases, values, and motivations of the researchers (Creswell, 1994). The primary field researcher in this project (LeBlanc) has been a public school administrator for the past eleven years in Jefferson Parish, and as such, has utilized the LTAAP program, its

procedures and documents as a tool in the certification process for new teachers. Both researchers share a belief that that induction is a crucial point in a new teacher's career, and that the initial period of teaching is crucial in forming teachers' beliefs about instruction. Both started this study with the belief that mentoring may play an important role in the retention of new teachers, but also recognize the alternative possibility, i.e., that mentoring may have no effect on teacher beliefs and practices and thus have little or no impact on retention in the teaching profession. Both have an abiding faith in the value of systematic, disciplined research as a mechanism to determine whether policies and practices like the state program of mentoring are actually working to increase teacher efficacy.

Potential biases in this study may stem from the fact that one researcher is a public school administrator, and both live in the parish where the research was conducted. Further, we both assume that mentoring is important to the successful induction of new teachers. An attempt was made to minimize the amount of bias, first, by recognizing these issues, and second, through use of a peer debriefer. An experienced educator with knowledge of the LTAAP program was consulted to discuss, read, and analyze the data and notes. The peer debriefer made sure that potential biases were evident and that they were minimized in data collection and analysis procedures.

Several additional steps were taken to ensure that the data were trustworthy. First, to avoid any response biases (i.e., the respondents telling the researchers what they thought he would like to hear), the researchers were careful to establish sufficient rapport and trust with the participants so that they could be comfortable and provide comments that were honest and complete (Zaruba, Toma, & Stark, 1996). Second, prior to conducting the focus groups, field tests of the interview format were conducted with experienced teachers, college faculty and

graduate students. Third, a reflective journal was kept during the data collection phase, and entries to this journal were coded thematically along with the transcribed focus group data. Fourth, as a reference check the researchers revisited the subjects as needed to insure that the data that had been collected were appropriate to answer the research questions, and to ensure that interpretations of the data were accurate.

Findings

The goal of the analytic strategy employed in this study was to isolate themes and identify data relating to these themes as they illustrate answers to the primary research questions. A number of themes were identified through this iterative process. The themes were organized into three groups: a) conditions associated with mentoring, including assignment of the mentor, time available for mentoring, location, and mentor training; b) relationships established between the mentor and mentee; and c) processes associated with mentoring (e.g., modeling, demonstrating teaching strategies, and listening as a critical friend).

Conditions associated with mentoring

The first theme emerging from the data relates to the formal conditions associated with the LTAAP mentoring program itself. Specifically, participants in the focus groups consistently brought up four issues. First, the process used to assign a mentor to the new teacher was extremely important. Eighty percent of the participants expressed concern with the selection process; ninety percent said that they had little or no input into the selection of their mentor. For instance,

> I was assigned a mentor in the beginning of the year… the relationship was established… probably I think the people at the board assigned her and I was just

> given… unless the principal assigned her to be my mentor… that wasn't discussed with me (FG 2, pg 3,lines 3-15).

There was widespread agreement that the assignment process was seldom explained, and virtually all participants felt that luck played a crucial role in determining the efficacy of mentoring, which was traced back to the assignment of mentors. This was a great concern for the participants who did not have a positive mentoring experience, and sometimes translated to feelings of unfairness or inequity. One participant summarized, "It's a shame that we all have to use the phrase 'luck' in something that really determines your certification" (FG 1, pg. 85, lines 14-18).

In sharp contrast, participants in one focus group noted that they were given an opportunity to meet prospective mentors prior to assignment. This produced an entirely different outcome from the type alluded to above:

> We were given an opportunity to pick mentors. The mentors and the teachers were put together and had a chance to get to know each other and talk a little bit and we kind of paired up. I think that's a really positive way to do it. For me, that's what mentoring is in my definition, to be able to choose someone that has the experience and that I can relate to. (FG 3, p. 13, lines 7-17)

Another participant in this group noted that they had an opportunity through this process to talk and decide if they represented a good match with a prospective mentor. Through this process, luck was replaced with relationship -- participants were granted the ability to establish a relationship with potential mentors before formalizing the assignment. The actual mentoring relationship began before the mentoring. Clearly, based on these data, this represents a preferred way of dealing with the issue of pairing mentors with mentees.

Logistics also played a crucial role in participants' sense of the efficacy of the mentoring experience. As Ganser (1999) put it, the heart of mentoring is the time that mentors

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and mentees spend together talking about teaching. In the next sections, issues relating to the quality of mentor-mentee interaction will be highlighted; logistics issues deal in large part with the quantity of interaction. In particular, the location of the mentor vis-à-vis their mentee and the time mentors had for mentoring were identified as important issues that impacted teachers' sense of isolation. These issues are related; having a mentor at another location cut into the amount of time available for face-to-face contact between mentor and mentee.

Over half of the focus group participants stated that location was very important in having a mentor available to them when needed. From the teacher's perspective, it was necessary for the mentor to be located on site for immediate interaction when a problem or issue arose. For instance, one participant stated, "It's easier to walk to her classroom than to say I'll meet you… It's more convenient because I am here until late. That's why I am glad my mentor is at my site" (FG 5, pg. 21, lines, 1-9). Another noted, simply, "My mentor was at central office and I was at my school. I just think if you were given a mentor at your school, you could run down the hall and ask them…the amount of time I could spend calling her, I could just bother somebody else at school" (FG 1, pg. 35, line 1-12). Another teacher expressed the notion that having a mentor at the same location afforded the opportunity for mentors and their mentees to become involved in a professional community of teachers who would be available to continue to help throughout the mentee's career.

Participants felt that optimally, for the mentoring process to have the greatest impact, their mentor should be in the same building and should be provided with an adequate amount of time to spend with them to help them develop the skills and abilities necessary to achieve certification. In all five focus groups, participants conveyed the feeling that time constraints were a major problem in the mentoring experience. Most of the participants felt that their

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mentor needed to spend more time with them. In general, time constraints translated to feelings that mentees had no one to help them when a problem or issue came up; oftentimes, by the time they were able to see their mentor, the presenting problem (or "teachable moment") had passed.

Finally, the issue of training available to the mentor emerged as a theme. The new teacher's mentor represents the most important ingredient in the mentoring process. Quality mentoring requires not only careful selection and attention to issues such as time and location, which were highlighted above, but also training and ongoing support for the mentor. Not every outstanding classroom teacher is necessarily a talented mentor; mentors require strong interpersonal skills, credibility with peers and administrators, a demonstrated curiosity and eagerness to learn, the respect of their peers, and outstanding instructional skills. More than half of the focus group participants complained that their mentors lacked some of the skills needed to be an effective mentor, particularly the interpersonal skills associated with effective supervisory behavior. Thus, in establishing an effective mentoring program, it is crucial to consider not only what a new teacher needs to be successful but also what a mentor teacher needs to know and be able to do in order to support a new teacher. The following sections relate to this, in the sense that they highlight issues relating to the mentor-mentee relationship and the specific tasks associated with the mentoring process.

Relationships established between the mentor and mentee

Mentoring has been likened to guiding someone on an expedition through unfamiliar territory (Ganser, 1998). As Bercik's (1994) research indicated, mentoring is more than a professional relationship; it is founded on the concept that a mentor works to aid an individual in becoming an independent and successful professional once weaned of support. This

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happens only if the foundation is firm and the parameters have been carefully set. Just as the classroom teacher is widely considered the essential ingredient for student learning and educational reform, so is the new teacher mentor the most important feature of any high quality induction program (Moir & Gless, 2001). The next theme deals with the quality of the mentoring relationship itself.

As one respondent put it, a mentor is "someone that comes in and helps you, shows you the way, kind of looks out for you. That's the relationship" (FG 1, pg. 7, lines 20-25). Respondents felt that without a good relationship mentoring could not occur. One element of relationship that was cited as important was becoming a critical friend, i.e., someone who understood that the new teacher is not a master at the trade, but is developing the skills and abilities associated with quality teaching. One respondent put it this way:

> I guess I would say a mentor is trying to help you work out the kinks that you experience your first year coming from someone more experienced and giving you assurance and encouragement and also positive criticism and negative criticism if you need it, on what needs to be changed for you to be effective as a teachers.... She's not there to grade you. You know, she's there to help you, and that helping process, you know, depends on who that mentor is that's chosen and what she perceives her role to be in helping you.... You're a new teacher, ... you might be a little shy about asking questions, and its good to have someone that will guide you through and help you and be able to, you know, foresee some of the problems you might be having ahead of time, too, because sometimes you don't have those questions in your mind until things get out of hand, too. So it's good to have someone experienced (FG 2, pgs. 20-21, lines 13-25 & 1-14).

Thus, the mentor is conceived as someone who has the skills and abilities to help engage the new teacher in a learning process, one that involves discovery and practice in an authentic setting, the mentee's classroom. This relates closely to some of the themes that will be noted in the next section, which focuses on the processes associated with effective mentoring, and especially in terms of the use of formative evaluation and feedback strategies to enhance

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professional practice. A significant part of the mentor's support involves "planting seeds" and allowing new teachers to develop their teaching practice. "When you get a mentor it's like you have ideas everywhere and it made it so nice. You just have so much support it makes you a better teacher" (FG 5, pg. 15-16, lines 7-19, 1-10). Research has shown that sometimes, new teachers feel isolated and emotionally disconnected from their mentors, and experience a sense that they have no one to turn to when they have a dilemma to solve (Mauer & Zimmerman, 2000). In much the same way, respondents in this study felt that the quality of the relationship was of paramount importance, and that the support associated with a strong, trusting relationship was instrumental in making mentoring worthwhile.

Seventy-five percent of the participants conveyed that when the relationship was beneficial for each person, i.e., when both mentor and mentee approached the relationship as a mutually beneficial learning opportunity, mentoring was successful. Mentoring represents a win-win situation because to truly serve as a mentor to a novice teacher, one must critically rethink one's teaching methods and strategies (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999).

The issue of time emerged in a number of distinctly different ways in relation to the theme of mentor-mentee relationship. First, a quality relationship was associated with longevity: "I think you need at least a year with one person. I think it is very important to keep a mentor as long as possible because you develop a bond with that person and you get passed the ice-breaking stage and the nervousness…" (FG 4, pg. 4, lines 20-25). From this perspective, the trust and quality of communication needed to optimize the mentoring experience was associated with having time for the relationship to mature. Time also emerged as an issue in relation to the primacy mentors placed on their role. In short, respondents felt it critical that the mentor devote sufficient attention to mentoring amidst their varied job

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responsibilities. One respondent associated this with the number of mentees taken on by a mentor:

> They only should be allowed one person. They can't mentor the whole school just to collect multiple paychecks. I mean you have to look at the mentor's caseload. Because some of them will take everybody and not want to help anybody (FG 2, pg. 51, lines 1-10).

Similarly, the following illustrates the fact that some teachers felt that their mentors simply did not make mentoring a priority, independent of the issue of caseload:

> I don't know if she just wanted the extra money and not do anything because it seems like she didn't have time for any of the new teachers to offer her assistance. We seemed to be more of a bother than a task that she had taken on. I felt that I couldn't ask for help because she was pressed for time (FG 2, pg. 26, lines 12-24).

All of the participants felt that they should be the mentor's top priority during the induction period, and that it was their mentor's job to assist them in the certification process and induction into the teaching profession.

Based on these data, the kind of relationship sought by mentees was epitomized by openness and honesty. The following respondent summed the issue up well:

> The mentor has to be dedicated. It's a lot of work but, I mean, this new teacher's relying on this mentor because this new teach is going through this big step, she's wondering, am I going to fail? I was relying on my mentor for guidance and support, kind of like, you know, your backbone, and if he or she's not dedicated or willing to give you the time of day it could be rough (FG 2, pg. 63, lines13-23).

Several participants felt that "confidentiality", "cooperation", and "access" were very important to establishing a relationship with their assigned mentor that would facilitate their improvement as teachers. Some mentees mentioned that they wanted a mentor who was a good "fit" in that they were in agreement with their philosophies as educators, and for some participants a match between subject or certification area was highlighted as an issue (which relates to the issue of assignment).

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In addition to the above-mentioned issues, which all focus squarely on the mentor's part in the mentoring relationship, some groups also mentioned the attitudes and beliefs necessary on the part of the mentee that are necessary for a quality mentoring relationship.

> I embrace observation, I'm not fearful of it.... I want to be mentored all of my teaching career. Another teacher even came with me to my mentor. She's like, "Every time you have a problem you go to your mentor," she was like, " I'm going with you," and she was a veteran teacher, I'm like " come on she's there to help." My friend who comes to the mentor with me said, "I've been teaching for over 20 years but you never stop needing guidance from somebody else and your mentor is wonderful." It's important for a first year to have someone to turn to (FG 5, pg. 39-40, lines 18-25 & 1-12).

The point here is that mentoring is a relationship, and that both mentor and mentee play a crucial role in the process. This may be thought of as a reciprocal process; as illustrated in the next quote, a mentee's openness to mentoring is reinforced by the mentor's approach to his/her craft:

> My mentor said that I was doing the right thing and that I know what to do and when time comes I will be fine on my own in the classroom. It's like, when somebody walks in to observe me in my classroom I'm like, "come on in," it doesn't bother me in the least, and I have to thank my mentor for that. She made me feel confident (FG 5, pg. 38, lines 1-10).

Thus, the mentoring relationship is built on the bedrock of both the mentor's and mentee's attitudes and beliefs about mentoring, and these attitudes are affected by the mentoring interaction itself.

Processes associated with mentoring

Moir and Gless (2001) contend that the pedagogy of mentoring should include an in-depth understanding of teacher development, professional teaching standards, performance assessment, and student content standards, along with strategies for classroom observation and a variety of coaching techniques. Learning occurs most successfully for the mentee when

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they have regular opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills and to problem-solve issues of practice with the assistance of their mentor. The final thematic area deals with the actual processes engaged in by mentors in their role in the LTAAP process.

According to Glickman (1990), teachers strengthen their skills and professionalism by interacting with each other rather than in isolation. They need to try new approaches in the classroom, share ideas with peers, and use peer input to evaluate and revise their teaching strategies. A successful mentoring relationship will make the most of this type of interaction, and the processes associated with mentoring will reflect these practices.

When mentoring was working, i.e., when mentees felt that it aided them in improving their teaching practice, respondents felt that their mentor was doing things like modeling effective practice, conducting sample lessons, and acting as a critical friend. As one respondent put it,

> I think the more experienced teachers can add to a young teacher's or new teacher's way of doing things. They may not adopt exactly what the more experienced teacher is sharing with them, but at least it gives them more options than just coming out of the classroom to know the actual effects that are going to be realized (FG 3, pg. 17, lines 1-15).

It should come as little surprise, given the previous data relating to mentor-mentee relationships, that the mentee's seeing value in the mentoring process seems important. However, the issues highlighted in this theme differ from the previous one. It is not simply a "strong relationship" that is important to the ability of mentoring to affect teaching practice, but the focus on teaching processes and the improvement of the mentee's professional practice that appears most important to the efficacy of mentoring.

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Effective mentoring practice focused on issues of importance to the mentee. Among others, for instance, several respondents cited time management as an issue that they dealt with often with their mentors:

> I went to my mentor and said, "I can't seem to fit my reading groups into my day. My days just seem so hectic, it seems like I'm falling short of time…," and I said, "Could you take a look maybe at my lesson plan and go over it with me and see maybe what I can omit or what am I spending too much time on or you know. So my mentor and I sat down and went over it and gave me suggestions on things that she did in her classroom and she convinced me to let he kids work independently because I had a really bad habit of wanting to teach them all day long and not letting them do things by themselves. She told me to stop babying them. To let them do things on their own (FG 5, pg. 26, lines 1-20).

Similarly, another respondent said, "I'm so busy with reading, read, read, read, read, that some days I have trouble making it to math. And she helped me out with… we worked out a schedule of how long I could spend on reading, and then I had to switch to math" (FG 4, pg. 37, lines 6-23). Not surprisingly, another often-mentioned issue that often came up between mentor and mentee was classroom management techniques, and in another group, practices involved in grouping students effectively for different instructional purposes was cited. Yet another is illustrated in this quote:

> My mentor helped me with a problem that has been plaguing me from the beginning of my teaching career. When I first started I had no idea as to what to do with early finishers "What? You're finished? Just read a book". My mentor gave me the idea of giving them challenging work like brain teasers, write songs, poems, write a story, or draw a picture all kinds of ideas (FG 2, pg. 36, lines 3-13).

There are many additional examples evident in the data, far too many to cite. In all of these cases, participants expressed a sense of gratitude that they had a mentor to help them, as well as the fact that they had experienced growth in terms of their repertoire of teaching skills. In most of the cases the mentor was a positive force in the new teachers experience.

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While in the above-mentioned examples the specific issues varied from teacher to teacher, the important theme here is that when mentoring had relevance – when it focused on the puzzles new teachers had to solve to improve their practice, and when the mentor had the time and was situated in a position to render assistance to the mentee, mentoring was perceived as valuable. One respondent put it this way: "She made me take time to reflect on my own teaching because when you are hustling, you're rushing around all the time and I would never think about what I did unless something went wrong. My mentor constantly told me to reflect on what worked and what didn't work" (FG 4, pg. 35, lines 15-25).

Mentoring as a process encouraged reflective practice, and provided a process available for new teacher to step back from the bustle of their professional settings to consider ways to improve their teaching practice.

> The mentoring helped me in the sense that it gave me an opportunity to feel good about some of the things that I thought I was doing in terms of having to explain maybe, or even to share some practices or strategies, allowed me to reflect on actually what I was doing and bouncing it off the mentor and that sort of thing. In terms of the practice, yes, it helped me in that regard because I believe without the mentor I'm not so sure if I would have done that type of self-evaluation on as regular a basis. Without them mentor, I believe I would not have done it. I have gone through the process. But bouncing it off someone else I definitely think it helped me (FG 3, pg. 22, lines 1-17).

Put simply, as another respondent put it, mentoring "…caused me to really take a closer look at how I was actually going about my profession" (FG 3, pg. 23, lines1-8).

These positive experiences were not universally cited. In fact, some respondents felt that their mentors were anything but effective listeners, and thus could not serve the role of critical friend. In one extreme example, the respondent looked outside of the relationship for relief:

> My mentor said that my objectives didn't match the goals at the end, but she didn't realize it was a whole unit plan. So I just ignored her. I'm not going to lie. I didn't do

> anything she said to do. I called our union for assistance. I needed my mentor changed. We didn't get along. She didn't know how to help me (FG 2, pg. 47, lines 1-7).

In other cases, the perception of the respondent was that the mentor had a fixed agenda, a script of sorts that he/she was following, so that instead of working with the mentee on issues relating to his/her professional growth, the dialogue was less relevant and considerably less useful. In contrast, when mentoring focused squarely on issues confronting participants and had a high degree of relevance to their current practice, they saw the process as a powerful aid to their professional development.

From the perspective of respondents, mentoring was particularly valuable to their professional growth and learning when their mentor modeled effective practice. For instance,

> I think when my mentor modeled a lesson it was great. Like I wanted to hear what other people are doing so I can kind of, not take their ideas, but kind of just put it all together and make it work for me. I would have figured it out, but it would have been a lot more frustrating, and some of the ideas that I got from her, I probably would have never thought of on my own, as far as just to say, oh, well, that's … you know, like when she said it, I'm like, "Well, I never really thought about that, but I could do that." I probably would have just been frustrated and probably would have just… I would have come up with something that worked, but it wouldn't have been as good and creative as putting everybody's ideas together and just making it work (FG 5, pg. 33, lines 1-18).

In fact, seventy-five percent of the respondents mentioned their mentors doing demonstration lessons as a valuable practice. Additionally, over half of the participants expressed the acceptance of new ideas for use in the classroom from their mentor.

Finally, data indicated that when instructional observations were used in combination with feedback sessions as a tool to help new teachers think critically about their practice, mentoring was considered to be a powerful aid in professional growth and development. For example,

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> I asked her if she would observe me in my math lesson because I was a little confused how to work a good transition and get them moving, and I showed her what I did, she told me it was fine. I just felt I wasn't sure of myself. I needed somebody to tell me that I was doing okay. I mean, I thought I was, but I just felt there was a little difficulty and she said, "no, you're doing fine". It made me feel great (FG 1, pg. 13, lines 1-15).

Mentoring encouraged learning situations by providing opportunities for new teachers to critically rethink their teaching methods and strategies.

The program of mentoring was thus based on reflection about what is crucial to a new teacher's practice. The data revealed that the amount of feedback that the mentor provided the mentee was crucial to the success of the mentoring process. As mentioned in the previous section on mentoring relationships, in this fashion, the mentor served the role of critical friend to the mentee.

Summary and Implications

The purpose of this study was to determine new teachers' perceptions of the impact of mentoring as evidenced through their experiences in the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program. In studying the effects of the mentoring component of LTAAP the following questions were addressed:

1. How was the mentoring component of LTAAP implemented?
2. How did the mentoring relationship influence practice of beginning teachers?

Data from five focus group sessions were used to answer these questions. Analysis of these data included repeated readings of written transcriptions, reviews of audiotapes, and reviews of reflective journal notes taken by the researcher after focus group sessions. The goal of the analytic strategy was to isolate themes and identify data relating to these themes as they illustrate answers to the primary research questions.

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A number of themes were identified through this iterative process. The themes were organized into three groups: a) conditions associated with mentoring, including assignment of the mentor, time available for mentoring, location, and mentor training; b) relationships established between the mentor and mentee; and c) processes associated with mentoring (e.g., modeling, demonstrating teaching strategies, and listening as a critical friend).

In terms of the conditions necessary for mentoring to be effective, four issues were identified: assignment of the mentor, location of the mentor, time available for mentoring activities, and mentor training. First, data reveal that many of the participants did not feel aware of how a mentor would be assigned. They attributed this lack of information to a breakdown between the system and themselves. Many acknowledged that luck played a major role in whether they were paired with a mentor who fit their needs. Most of the participants were not satisfied with the fact that something this important was left up to luck.

Time and location were also conditions deemed necessary for a mentoring relationship to be established. More than half of the participants wanted more time to spend with their mentors. Others just wanted to be located within the same building. Most of the participants cited that isolation in their first year of teaching was a problem, and that having a mentor in the same building and one who had time for them was important in lessening this problem.

In terms of relationship between mentor and mentee, data revealed that all participants felt that a good relationship was vital to a successful mentoring experience. For most teachers the relationship was positive, but many expressed feelings of anxiety because of their relationship with the mentor. Since the new teachers' certification was dependent upon the program most of the participants wanted a good relationship with their mentor. The

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participants who didn't have a good relationship cited lack of preparation of the mentor, lack of interpersonal relationship skills and lack of enthusiasm for the program.

Relationship is important precisely because new teachers feel alone or isolated, and at a loss about who to turn to when they are facing a puzzle they cannot solve in their teaching practice. They need committed professionals who are trained to teach teachers. For some, it was even important that they could have a mentor who was teaching the same subject and grade level. This kind of relationship gave the participant a great deal of confidence in their mentor, and allowed trust to develop. Mentoring was considered a reciprocal relationship, one that provided opportunities for both the mentor and mentee to learn and develop.

The last theme dealt with the processes used in mentoring. In short, when mentoring was working, i.e., when mentees felt that it aided them in improving their teaching practice, respondents felt that their mentor was doing things like modeling effective practice, conducting sample lessons, and acting as a critical friend. Evaluation techniques were being used to provide formative feedback to mentees on their teaching practice, and this became the basis for learning and experimentation for both mentor and mentee.

A descriptive theory of mentoring

One goal of qualitative research is theory generation. The findings presented may be arrayed in a fashion that suggests a parsimonious, yet powerful theory of mentoring. While the relationship between themes is speculative, there is ample support in the data presented to suggest that the three themes emerging from the focus group data may be configured to provide an integrated picture of the practices necessary for mentoring to realize its promise in the context of teacher induction in Louisiana. Figure 1 displays the proposed model.

Mentoring conditions may be seen as the bedrock upon which mentoring is built.

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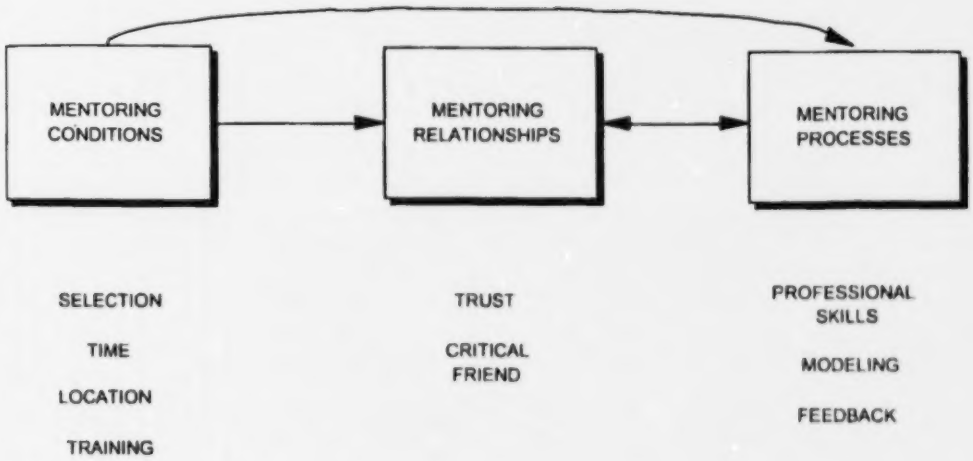
Figure 1: A Theory of Mentoring



These conditions may be necessary components of an effective mentoring program, though they would appear to be insufficient unto themselves to guarantee any impact on practice. They deal largely with the design of the mentoring program and other structural issues. However, from the data presented, the absence of these factors or failure to deal effectively with them serves to limit the potential of mentoring. When these conditions are met, it seems logical to conclude that there is a higher likelihood that a strong relationship, built on mutual trust and respect, would emerge between mentor and mentee. Factors like effective selection, location, time and training provide the context under which a strong relationship can be fostered, one that is consistent and open to authentic dialogue about issues of importance to both the mentor and mentee.

Finally, if the conditions exist that promote the development of a quality mentoring relationship, and one is established, it seems much more likely that the actual practices engaged in by mentor and mentee would epitomize the kinds of authentic experiences cited as effective. Put simply, things like modeling effective practice, conducting sample lessons, and

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acting as a critical friend would be more likely to occur when the mentor is available, well-trained, has the time and has made mentoring a priority. Likewise, it seems reasonable to speculate that these practices would be more likely to occur when mentor and mentee have established a strong relationship.

Implications for Future Research

Induction for beginning teachers is among the most important factors in retaining new teachers in the profession. Policy makers need to be aware of the processes in place to incorporate our new teachers in the profession. Hopefully, this study has brought new insights into how new teachers need to be inducted into our profession.

There are multiple levels of implications from this study, starting with issues that involve isolated findings, extending to studying the relationships among and between two sets of findings, and finally involving the implications of the proposed theory of mentoring, which delineates one notion about how each of these themes relate to one another.

The findings presented here generally support prior research, which is supportive of mentoring but suggests that implementation issues often stand in the way of realizing any impact on teaching quality. Specific issues identified suggest that policy makers and practitioners need to examine an array of implementation issues, especially those outlined under the theme involving the conditions of mentoring. For instance, it seems reasonable to suggest that state and local level officials in Louisiana need to examine the procedures used to select and assign mentors, as well as procedures involved in training mentors and assuring that they understand the role as involving relationship building and practices such as modeling and providing formative feedback. Interpersonal skills such as listening, patience, and

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understanding are imperative to mentoring, and ways to ensure that mentors develop and use these skills need to be worked out.

Findings also indicate that time for mentoring is important, and that without it, relationship building does not occur. Perhaps the mentoring program in our state could be expanded to allow experienced teachers to leave their classrooms for a year to become a mentor for new teachers. This is not without precedent; for instance, Jambor, Patterson, and Jones (1997) observe that in Alabama, master teachers are allowed to leave the classrooms to do mentoring for a year. During the year the mentor focuses on coaching and encouraging new teachers to reflect on their performance. Often the mentor teacher will model specific lessons or invite other mentors to do so. At other times, the mentor will teach the class while the first-year teacher observes in another classroom or at another school.

Finally, future research should be conducted to determine the viability of the proposed integrated theory of mentoring practices. The present study represented a small number of new teachers and a single policy context. While it clearly identified problem areas that kept the mentoring program from having maximum benefit for these teachers, it is impossible in the context of this study to know whether the relationships suggested in the model are accurate, or what parts of the model might be generalizable to other states or policy contexts. Specific research mimicking the present study in other states would be a welcome start, as would any studies focusing in greater depth on the relationships among and between the individual themes.

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